

Melchers Building
51 Merchant Street
Honolulu
Honolulu County
Hawaii

HABS No. HI-34

*HABS
HI,
2-HONLU,
17-*

PHOTOGRAPHS

*APPENDIX
FOLIOS*

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D. C. 20240

Addendum to:
Melcher's Building
55 Merchant Street
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MELCHER'S BUILDING

HABS NO. HI-34

Location: 55 Merchant Street, City and County of Honolulu, Hawaii.
Zone 2, Sec. 1, Plat 02, Tax Key #20.

Present Owner: City and County of Honolulu.

Present Occupant
and Use: Vacant.

Significance: The Melcher's building is one of Honolulu's oldest extant buildings and one of the first commercial structures in downtown Honolulu constructed in a material other than wood. Its coral stone blocks mark it as a prominent structure for the young city of the mid-nineteenth century.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION.

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1853, 1937-38. The Melcher's building was constructed in 1853. An addition was made in 1937-38 which increased the building's size by approximately seventy-five percent. [Thrum's Annual, 1899, p. 98, Sanborn maps, 1927 and 1927 corrected to 1951, Downtown Improvement Association Research Department Map, 1964.]
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

1853	Gustave Melcher and Gustave Reiners built the structure.
1867	sold to F. A. Schaefer
1920	sold to Hawaiian Dredging Co.
1950	sold to City and County of Honolulu

[Thrum's Annual, 1899, p.98, City Directories, 1880-present, and Tax Records.]

4. Original plans and construction: The original structure was a three-by-four-bay building, its Merchant Street facade being the longer, the Kaahumanu Street facade the shorter. This configuration is documented in a late 1850s lithograph by Paul Emmert (reproduced in Scott), and confirmed by fire insurance maps. The structure had a basement, which was unusual at that time for a building so close to the ocean. The coral stone building was topped by a hipped roof above a simple cornice. Interior configuration is not known.
5. Alterations and additions: Between 1886 and 1890, according to photographs of those dates, the cornice was elaborated to become more classical, and the roof was flattened. In addition, the heretofore large door and window openings were made smaller, and the quoins were stuccoed and de-emphasized.

To the right/west/ewa direction of the original store was an alley between Melcher's and a simple one-story stone building, as shown by fire insurance maps and historic photographs. A 1900 photograph indicates that the alley had been turned into a driveway with identical piers flanking its entry, indicating a more formal relationship between Melcher's and the smaller structure. An uncorrected 1927 Sanborn map shows a frame structure spanning the alley between the two structures, thus connecting them.

Probably in 1937-38, Melcher's Building was significantly enlarged by the addition to the west/ewa, of another two bays, each with two windows at the second level. The connecting bay has a wide door at the lower floor. The lower level of the corner bay is unpenetrated by openings. These two bays may be conversions of the earlier alley and one-story warehouse-style structure. The Sanborn maps date the addition as 1937. Similarly, a volume published by Downtown Improvement Association Research Department in 1964 shows the current building with the date "1938" written on it. Evidence suggests, then, that 1937-38 saw the addition to the old Melcher's Building.

Various unspecified interior renovations were performed under the city's direction from 1965 to the present [Building permit 2-1-02-20, #'s 21112 and 105238]. The city and county of Honolulu has begun a major renovation and remodeling of Melcher's for continued office use.

B. Historical Context:

Gustave Melcher and Gustave Reiners were German importers, commission merchants, and ship chandlers. They began construction on their company building in 1853. The store was officially opened on February 20, 1853, with a celebratory luncheon. The structure was fitted with koa counters and glass-enclosed shelving. It sold mostly European goods, items found in most drygoods stores of that time, including fabrics, cigars, and china goods. In 1867 F. A. Schaefer, who had been a clerk of the store in the 1850s, purchased the firm from Melcher and Reiners and continued to operate the business at this site. Schaefer was Consul of the Kingdom of Italy. [Thrum's Annual, 1899, and Bowser, p. 459.]

Upon Schaefer's relocation in 1920, Melcher's building became the home office of Hawaiian Dredging Company, Ltd., an engineering and construction firm with seven branches elsewhere in the islands. This company, in turn, sold the building in 1950 to the City and County of Honolulu.

After its present renovation, the Melcher's building will house offices of the City and County of Honolulu.

Report prepared by Laura S. Alderman, Project Historian.

For background information on this downtown neighborhood, see HABS No. HI-55.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Melcher's Building is a simple rectangular building constructed of coral stone and is the oldest extant structure in the Merchant Street National Register district.
2. Condition of fabric: The building is undergoing extensive rehabilitation during the summer and fall of 1987. Major structural changes are being made.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 85'-0" along Merchant Street and 41'-6" along Bethel Street; it stands approximately 24' high. A two-story rectangular block, with partial basement; there are six bays along Merchant Street and five bays along Bethel and Kaahumanu Streets.

2. Foundations: Inaccessible for inspection.
3. Walls: At least a portion of the building is constructed of coral stone blocks and stuccoed. Coral stone is exposed on the rear wall. The portion at Bethel and Merchant may be of brick construction and stuccoed. There is a projecting belt course at the second-floor level and a double cornice on the parapet. The stucco is painted white. An equipment room on the roof near the rear of the building has concrete block walls. A portion of the rear wall beneath the equipment room is of concrete block.
4. Structural system, framing: Coral stone bearing walls with joist system.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The principal entrance is situated to the right of center on the Merchant Street facade. The recessed doorway is a modern aluminum and glass composition. A second door is located at the left side of the Kaahumanu Street facade. It is aluminum and glass and is set within a simple portal somewhat Egyptian Revival in character.
 - b. Windows and shutters: The first-floor openings along Merchant Street have been filled in with concrete block. Second-floor windows are six-over-six-light wood double-hung with unarticulated openings. There are projecting sills. Some openings are set within iron frames which have evidence of shutter hardware. Along Bethel Street are similar second-floor windows. On the first floor of this facade are three small louvered openings in the three right-hand bays. On Kaahumanu Street the second-floor windows are similar to other facades. First-floor openings are blocked shut in a manner similar to those on Merchant Street. There are no openings on the rear wall.
6. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: There is a flat roof with parapet. The surface is of rolled composition material. There is an equipment room on the roof at the rear of the building.
 - b. Cornice: The building has a parapet with a double molded cornice which appears to be of concrete. There are leader boxes and downspouts on three of the four corners (corner of Merchant and Kaahumanu excepted). An equipment penthouse is situated on the roof at rear center.

C. Description of Interior:

The interior has undergone extensive modification and is being prepared for additional modifications in the summer and fall of 1987. The building is to be gutted to the exterior walls and rebuilt. Nothing of significance remains within the building.

D. Site:

The Melcher's Building is situated on the makai side of Merchant Street in the Merchant Street National Register district. It occupies that portion of the block fronting on Merchant Street between Bethel and Kaahumanu Streets. The building sits on the property lines and is backed up by a three-story public parking structure.

In this description, local designation is given for orientation. "Mauka" means mountain direction, "Makai" means sea direction, "Diamond Head" means in the direction of Diamond Head crater, "Ewa" means in the direction of the town of Ewa (opposite Diamond Head direction).

Report prepared by Robert C. Giebner, Project Supervisor.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

From the Bishop Museum Photograph Collection:

Files: "Geography. Oahu. Honolulu Streets. Merchant S. pre-1900", "Geography. Oahu. Honolulu Streets. Merchant S. 1900-".

Album 12, Page 30, "C.B. Mus. 104, Gartley 196. Merchant Street, Honolulu, ca. 1890?"

Baker, Ray Jerome, Honolulu Then and Now. #'s 30983 and 30992.

Hawaii State Archives File: "BLDGS, BUS: A-Z". Contains 1960s photography of Melcher's building.

Emmerts, Paul. Lithograph of 1850s, depicting Melcher's building. Reproduced in Edward B. Scott, Saga of the Sandwich Islands, Crystal Bay, Lake Tahoe, Nev.: The Sierra-Tahoe Publishing Co., 1968.

B. Primary and Unpublished Sources:

Hawaii Directories, 1880-1954. Hawaii State Archives and Bishop Museum Library.

Honolulu Business Directory. 1889. Bishop Museum Library.

Maps: Anthon's Map of 1862, reproduced in Scott's Saga of the Sandwich Islands.

Lion Fire Insurance Company, 1879. Bishop Museum Map Collection.

B. F. Dillingham Fire Insurance Company for Board of Fire Underwriters of Honolulu, 1900, and 1906 corrected to 1911. Bishop Museum Map Collection and Hawaii State Archives.

Sanborn Map Company, 1914 uncorrected (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.), 1914 corrected to 1925, 1927 uncorrected, and 1927 corrected to 1951. Bishop Museum Map Collection and Hawaii State Archives.

Downtown Improvement Association Research Department, 3-9-1964. Hawaii State Archives.

Tax Records, Tax Assessor's office, 842 Bethel Street, Honolulu, Hawaii. Records for "Zone 2, Sec. 1, Plat 02, #20".

Building Permits, Municipal Building, Honolulu, Hawaii. #'s 21112 and 105238.

Hawaii State Archives "Historic Buildings Task Force" File #TMK 2-1-02-20. University of Hawaii architecture student's 1965 report on Melcher's building.

Greer, Richard. "Merchant Street Notes." Hawaii Historical Review 1 (Jan. 1963): 183-199.

Bowser, George. An Itinerary of the Hawaiian Islands, With a Description of the Principal Towns and Places of Interest. 1880.

Scott, Edward B. The Saga of the Sandwich Islands, vol. I. Crystal Bay, Lake Tahoe, Nev.: The Sierra-Tahoe Publishing Co., 1968.

Thrum, Thomas. Hawaiian Almanac and Annual. Honolulu: Black & Auld Printers, 1899, p.98; 1915, p.44; 1921, p.141.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was jointly sponsored by First American Title Co., Historic Hawaii Foundation, and the National Park Service. Recorded under the direction of Kenneth L. Anderson, Chief of HABS, and Alison K. Hoagland, HABS Historian, the project was completed during the summer of 1987 at the Honolulu field office. Project supervisor was Robert C. Giebner (University of Arizona); project historian was Laura S. Alderman (Washington, D.C.); architectural foreman was J. Scott Anderson (Washington, D.C.); and architectural technicians were Coy E. Burney (University of Maryland), Kenneth R. Imoehl (University of Arizona), and Michel A. van Ackere (Brown University).

PART V. SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

Following is a photocopy of a photograph from the Bishop Museum, File: Geography-Oahu. Honolulu Streets, Merchant St. pre-1900, "Merchant St., 1886," Neg. No. 46075. The two-story building on the right is Melcher's Building before alterations. It has a hipped roof and distinct quoins. For another view, see Supplemental Information for Bank of Bishop & Co. Building, HABS No. HI-55 I.



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Geo. Duka, Honolulu - Merchant St, 1914-1903

Merchant St. 1880